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Bexhill Museum
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BUILDING SOCIETY

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Small is beautiful

E.F. Schumacher

The first meeting of the board of directors of the Bexhill-on-Sea Building Society was held at 10 Sea Road, Bexhill, the office of Mr Gaby the Solicitor on Saturday 16th May 1914.

An earlier attempt to found a Building Society in Bexhill had come to naught. In the street directory of 1899 under the section headed "Societies Clubs and Institutions" can be found the following:

"Bexhill Permanent Building Society (incorporated under the Building Societies Act 1874) – The object of this Society is to raise, by the subscription of its members, a stock or fund to make advances to members on security of freehold, copyhold or leasehold property, by way of mortgage, pursuant to the Building Societies Act 1874. It may consist of any number of members, each holding any number of shares. Each member on admission shall pay, as an entrance fee, such sum (not more than 2/6d per share) as the directors shall from time to time appoint. Trustees: Mr F. A. Langham and Mr James Woodhams. Directors: Mr J. D. Atchison, Mr E. S. Douglas, Mr C. Wellerd, Mr G. H. Gray, Mr T. Bodle, Mr Gordon Beeching, Lloyds Bank, Bexhill: Solicitor Mr E. S. Douglas. Secretary, Mr Thos. J. Cornish, 3 Devonshire Terrace, where prospectuses, rules, and all other information may be obtained. Subscription meetings are held on the second Monday in every month at 8 p.m. The members of the Society meet at Mr Gordon Green's Estate Office, 3 Devonshire Terrace."

Those associated with the 1899 venture seem to have been mainly professional men. The Society started in 1914 emanated from the old Commercial Association. It was this Association which formed a committee to establish the Building Society and the local businessmen who served on that committee became the first directors. They were A. G. Wells, T. Davis, R. C. Hampton, J. F. Philcox, J. Rogers, S. Carey and D. B. McGregor. Arthur George Wells, at the time chairman of the Commercial Association, was elected the first chairman of the board, an office which he retained until ill-health forced him to retire in 1931. Wells was prominent in the public life in the town for many years. When elected the town's first citizen in 1921, Wells claimed to be Bexhill's first tradesman Mayor. He was the proprietor of the Nevill Bakery in Devonshire Road.

The original directors were remarkable for the length of their service to the Society. Tom Davis was elected vice-chairman; he succeeded A. G. Wells in the chair and remained in that office until his death in 1937. Tom Davis owned a leather goods shop in Sackville Road and his wife "Madam Evelyn Davis" sold high-class model gowns, coats and millinery at Paris House in Devonshire Road.

As an Alderman of the Borough Robert Charles Hampton was a man of considerable eminence and entitled to special consideration. Hamp-

ton carried on business as a tailor in St. Leonards Road and lived above the shop, which with its mahogany interior and hushed superiority exuded class.

John Foster, who ended his distinguished career as the doyen of local estate agents, started work in 1923 – attired in short trousers – at the next door office of Ernest Sheather the Estate Agent. He recalls that Hampton was seriously ill and peat was strewn on the carriageway to deaden the noise from the traffic – mainly mechanical but still including the clip-clop of horse drawn vehicles.

J. F. Philcox and D. B. McGregor were both grocers. Philcox, who served continuously as a director until his death in 1952, was by all accounts a cheerful man full of the joys of spring, who walked with quick short steps frequently with a song on his lips.

J. Rogers was the well-known builder in the Old Town and it was he who undertook the substantial alterations and renovations carried out to the Society's offices in Devonshire Square, which were opened in 1926. Stephen Carey was the contractor who lived at Haddocks Hill (now Wrestwood Road). More of him anon.

There were also in attendance at that first meeting Sidney Shorter and Ralph H. Gaby. Shorter was secretary of the Commercial Association and the natural choice to be the Society's first secretary. This was a part-time job in those early years when the Society's business was conducted from his house at 45 Amherst Road. Allen Hardwicke's son recalls Shorter "bustling about". This was not surprising as his other multifarious appointments included superintendent of the Bexhill Ambulance Brigade, Hon. Secretary of the Tradesmen's Ball and Manager of the Colonnade. When he died his active part in the town merited a leader in the Bexhill Observer which concluded "he leaves a record of many things attempted and many things well done".

Ralph Gaby was the Society's first Solicitor and the firm which he founded has remained the Society's Solicitors until this very day. Gaby was a great chap for starting things. He is best remembered for his work as Solicitor to the Incorporation committee. Gaby drew up the petition which led to the Charter signed by Edward VII which conferred on Bexhill the status of a Borough.

In the words of the first Annual Report, "a more unfortunate time than the summer of 1914 could scarcely have been chosen for the inauguration of a Building Society". Despite the outbreak of war the first eight months of the Society's life saw £508 invested in shares and £750 lent on two mortgages. The directors stuck it out and the 1917 Annual Report informed members that the directors had "foregone interest for the past two years in order to place the Society upon a sound financial footing". It was not until 1923 that the question of fees for the directors was first mentioned and £100 was "allotted to the directors for their services".

Once the Armistice was signed in 1918 the Society picked up wonderfully. The Bexhill Observer commented on the Society's start that "any institution endowed with less vitality would have gone under and that when conditions improved it developed in a normal and congenial air into a flame of strength".

These must have been heady days. In 1919 no withdrawals were made whatever and during the year thirteen mortgages were granted. The following year the amount invested in the Society had been increased four-fold. The amount lent on mortgage had increased from £2,911 to £7,143. Again and again the Annual Report records that "every mortgage held is of undoubted security and all repayments are up-to-date". In 1922 the rules were altered so that there could be a maximum of twenty directors. In fact there were as many as fourteen directors at this time. This seems to have been a quite extraordinarily large number for a Society whose assets only amounted to £22,000. There were still no directors fees. Might it have been status that induced the new-comers to offer their services? Possibly in some cases a discreet hint was thrown out that an investment in the Society might lead to a seat on the board.

The meetings of the board continued to be held at the Solicitor's office, which had moved to 3A Sea Road (above Gordon Green & Webber the Estate Agents). Gaby had been joined in April 1919 by H. J. Allen Hardwicke. Gaby continued to practise.in Hastings while Allen Hardwicke built up the practice in Bexhill. Hardwicke very quickly took over as Solicitor to the Bexhill Building Society, which remained an abiding interest until his death in 1965. The Society had no more enthusiastic supporter. To help the expansion of the Society, Hardwicke offered to take up twelve fully paid shares of £25 each provided twelve others were taken up. He knew how to advertise without breaking the rules of the Solicitors' profession.

In 1921 the first office was opened. This had been "secured in a unique position, adjoining the London Brighton & South Coast Railway Station, not only central for members residing in the town but very convenient for persons coming in from outlying districts by train, tram or bus". This office was sited at the eastern end of Endwell Road in the central station railway building and was later used for many years as an Estate Agents office. By 1925 the Society was looking not only for more commodious office premises but also for a larger room in which the board could meet. "The Board Meetings were uncomfortably crowded in Mr. Hardwicke's office". A room at the Victoria Hall was on offer at 5/- per night and Arscott's cafe in St. Leonards Road could be hired at the same figure. In fact the board moved to "the Social Centre" which was available at 4/- a night. This Social Centre is now the Church Army Youth Centre in Station Road.

At the very end of 1925, Tom Davis was asked by the board to negotiate the purchase of T. Scott Sherratt's property 2 Devonshire Square also

called at that time Devonshire Terrace. The price for the freehold was to be a maximum of £3,000. At a board meeting held on 12th January 1926, Davis reported that the front of the building was in a serious condition. The board meeting was interrupted while Rogers and Gordon Harris, the two builder members, "went across and inspected the property and on return reported that the front bay had left the main wall – estimated £800/£900 to be spent." Nevertheless the board decided to buy at the price of £3,000 plus £50 for office fittings. All members of the Society who were builders were asked to tender for the necessary repairs and alterations and the job was given to James Rogers & Sons. The purchase was completed on 17th March 1926.

The official opening of the new offices took place on Tuesday 14th September 1926. What a day that must have been. Before the company stepped across the road for the formal opening by T. R. Chandler, deputy chairman of the National Association of Building Societies and secretary of the Woolwich Co-operative Building Society, the directors, their wives and distinguished guests took luncheon at the Devonshire Hotel. They ate in the same room where the Commercial Association had decided to start the Building Society twelve years earlier. How they loved making speeches in those days. There were no less than five toasts proposed and responded to at the luncheon. The Mayor in proposing the toast "success to the Bexhill-on-Sea Building Society" referred to its "history of a romantic character". Mr Chandler told the assembled company that there were over a thousand Building Societies and that their funds totalled two hundred million pounds. "For the last forty years Building Societies had been contributing to the prosperity of the artisan classes and now they were extending their work a little higher in the social scale". Mr Chandler made a second speech when declaring the new offices open and pointed out that the Society were practising what they preached by becoming their own landlords.

The photograph of the board (on page 7) taken at the time of the opening of the new offices includes (with the exception of J. W. D. Burgess) those directors who were first elected at the beginning of the 1920s when the Society started to grow and remained in office until the second world war. These were Ralph Burstow, partner in Burstow and Hewett the auctioneers, Percy Webber, Walter Spreag, who was associated with the old Bexhill Coal Company, William Gordon Harris, Jethro Arscott and T. E. Marchant.

Until 1970 the directors carried out their own valuations of properties offered as security. With their local knowledge and abundant common sense, they did a splendid job and seldom did they come unstuck. As Gordon Davis put it much later "the directors have grown up with Bexhill and have an intimate knowledge of its history and geography. They can remember whether a certain plot of land was once a swamp, or

Directors and Officials 1926
Top row l-r: T. J. Walters, S. Shorter,
J. Arscott, J. F. Philcox,
Ald. R. C. Hampton, P. Webber,
R. H. Burstow, F. L. Hubbard,
H. J. A. Hardwicke
Bottom row l-r: J. Rogers,
Cllr. T. Davis, Ald. A. G. Wells,
Cllr. W. Gordon Harris,
T. E. Marchant, W. Spreag

was crossed by a stream, or has been filled in: whether the older properties were built by builders of good or bad repute". The directors were paid a small fee for attending surveys and this led to some ill-feeling as to who should comprise the survey committee. In the end it was decided that the entire board should form the survey committee and that invitations to conduct surveys should be issued in strict rotation. It has been suggested – most unworthily – that these directors and those of the next generation included a number of ample girth, who lacking technical know-how, jumped up and down a couple of times on the floorboards and if no damage resulted passed the house as soundly built.

Tom Marchant sold bicycles at 52 St Leonards Road. Prams and bathchairs were also on display but bicycles – Swifts, Raleighs and Sunbeams (the Rolls Royce of bicycles) – were his speciality. On occasions he wore knickerbockers, a garment entirely appropriate to his calling.

Both Tom Marchant and Jethro Arscott were pillars of Sackville Road Methodist Church. Although never a councillor, Jethro Arscott's impact on local affairs was considerable. He is best remembered for his part in the foundation of Bexhill Hospital. Arscott's cafe in St Leonards Road was for many years a popular social rendezvous. A number of Bexhill old-timers recall with gratitude that in the poverty of the great depression which followed the Wall Street crash of 1929 stale bread and cakes could be bought at nominal prices from the bakery in Wilton Road.

It is obvious from the minutes of the directors' meetings that they were not always conducted with sweetness and light. The directors included some mighty strong-willed characters and harmony does not seem to have been the overriding consideration. It has to be recorded – filial piety notwithstanding – that no one contributed more to the "robust" nature of these meetings than Jethro Arscott. On many occasions he was in a minority of one and his name appears on every sub-committee appointed: it was obvious that if he was not appointed to the sub-committee then he would occupy the time of the directors when the same matter came before the entire board. On one occasion he was the sole member to declare himself against a vote of confidence in the chairman.

Percy Webber served as a director from 1920 until his death in 1967 – a term even longer than that of J. F. Philcox. He was a leading estate agent in the town at a time when competition was perhaps even more fierce than it is today. In addition Percy Webber conducted for many years a regular furniture auction. There can be few callings more stressful and tiring or requiring greater concentration than the conduct of a day-long auction. Percy's caring wife fortified him for the fray with Guinness and oysters.

William Gordon Harris was another builder member of the board. He was generally regarded as one of the town's pillars during its development in the early years of the century. At his funeral it was said that he

was what Dr Johnson called "a clubbable man". He liked to be with his friends and was always good company. He had a habit of starting many sentences "Ar-rum", but was seldom at a loss for words and was in great demand as an after-dinner speaker.

An important absentee from the opening of the new offices was Stephen Carey, a shrewd businessman but not noted for his literacy. By December he was convalescing after a prolonged illness. Despite his doctor's injunction to remain at home, he succumbed to the temptation of attending the monthly board meeting so that he could see his friends and pick up the threads again. His colleagues gave him a warm welcome but the meeting was later interrupted by a telephone call from a flustered Mrs Carey. She demanded to speak to her husband; the doctor had called in his absence and she was at a loss to know what to tell him. Stephen's reply was phlegmatic: "You tell him, my dear, maybe the bird is flew".

When the Society first purchased 2 Devonshire Square, "the upper part of the premises being satisfactorily let off", the Society occupied initially only the ground floor. Rooms upstairs were used at times by the Toc H, the Conservative Association, the Hospital committee and also as a ladies hairdressing salon. In 1929 it was agreed to fit a counter in the front office and move the board room to the first floor. The board room was made available for property auctions at a fee of 12/6d "to include a board outside for one week prior to auction". The board room could also be hired at 7/6d a time for committee meetings.

The Society continued to advance and in 1929 an important milestone was passed. Its assets were £115,000 and the Society took its place among "the six figure group". For the first time the lenders and depositors exceeded a thousand. The Society's activities were spreading beyond the confines of Bexhill and the following year showed that the Society had members with addresses in places as far flung as the U.S.A. and India and lent on houses in the counties of Middlesex, Hampshire and Wiltshire as well as Sussex.

In 1931 Tom Davis, now chairman, and William Gordon Harris were given a complimentary dinner on their return from the International Convention of Building Societies at Philadelphia, U.S.A. Proposing their toast R.C. Hampton described them as "the lions of the evening". The Society's treasurer went on to add that "these two public-spirited directors bore the whole of the expenses of their visit to America. Their tour did not cost the Society a penny. I hope the press will make a special point of that". Neither of the travellers seemed over-impressed by what they found on the other side of the Atlantic. Gordon Harris, the true patriot, said "I am not at all enamoured of the States and much prefer to be back in old England". The famous Niagara Falls were thought by Davis "to be over-rated". Maybe it was Tom Davis, who when told that 500,000

gallons of water went over every second, replied "There's nowt to stop it".

In April 1932 Sidney Shorter died prematurely at the age of 52 and R.C. Hampton took over as acting secretary. Following the ordeal of an interview by the entire fourteen members of the board, the eighteen year old Walter Stephen Ledger had been appointed junior clerk in 1925. He was assistant secretary at the time of Shorter's death and applied for the post of secretary which in his own words "was a bit saucy of me". The directors kept him in suspense until formally appointing him secretary in 1934, an office which he held until 1972. It was generally thought that when first appointed he was the youngest Building Society secretary in the country. He was elected a director in 1962 and remained on the board until his death in 1986, so completing more than sixty years of service to the Society. In 1958 Walter Ledger was chairman of the South Eastern Counties Association of Building Societies (a body which he had helped to found). A large genial man with an ever-ready smile, "Wally" as he was affectionately called was much around the town and personified "the Bexhill" for two generations.

In May 1933, Douglas Carey (the son of Stephen) was engaged as junior clerk at 12/6 per week. Douglas Carey returned to the Society after serving in the second world war and acted as assistant secretary until he departed in 1954 to find fame and fortune with the Colchester Equitable Building Society. He recalls the subscription meetings held on the first Monday of every month in these words:

"Subscriptions for Investment Shares and mortgage repayments were due on the first Monday of the month, consequently the office always opened for an hour between 7 p.m. and 8 p.m. to enable members to make their payments on the due day if they were working. It was one of the duties of a director to attend and assist the secretary. Although when I joined the Society the directors no longer attended, the practice of opening for that extra hour continued until after the second world war, but by then it was no longer used by members to any great extent; in fact we could almost say for certain who would be coming in and the time they would arrive.

Being very much a local Society, naturally it was a very personal concern and of course it had its personalities both among the board and the members. Secrecy was a very high priority with many members, so much so that there were some who would never come inside the office if another person was there; in some cases this was taken to extreme lengths. I can remember very clearly one particular member who worked at the Central Station, who would always come up to the gate in Devonshire Square from where he could see if the office was empty; if it was clear he would come in and always went to the counter space behind the door and then proceeded to take from his waistcoat pockets sometimes up to 100 carefully folded notes, usually folded in four, and he

would stand in front of the cashier until they had been unfolded and counted as he never knew how much he was carrying."

Douglas Carey also recalls the annual deed audit attended by the members' auditor. All packets of deeds received or opened during the year had to be sealed or resealed with old-fashioned red sealing wax. For some years the part of the members' auditor in this solemn ceremony was carried out by Sergeant Turner, formerly of the East Sussex Constabulary, who performed his task with all the diligence and earnestness befitting a man of his experience and position.

1936 was a memorable year. For the first time the assets of the Society topped £250,000. For the future the treasurer was to be "honorary". An adding machine was purchased for £37.5.0d, which seems extraordinarily forward looking. In September A. G. Wells died and the election of the new deputy chairman started a clash which rumbled on for years. Jethro Arscott maintained that Ralph Burstow was not suitable for the deputy chair because his firm, Burstow and Hewett were agents for a neighbouring building society. Notwithstanding this objection Burstow was elected chairman the following year, after the death of Tom Davis.

The Annual General Meeting held in March 1937 decided that the number of directors should be reduced to ten. There were six candidates for three vacancies and the three retiring directors were all re-elected. The following year one of the defeated candidates, Alderman A. H. Davis, was elected for the first time. The controversy concerning Burstow's chairmanship was not at an end. Both Hampton and Arscott voted against his re-election.

Hitler was marching across Europe and the war clouds were gathering. At the time of the Munich crisis in 1938 the number of withdrawals increased and the Society had to make special arrangements with the Bank to ensure that withdrawal cheques were honoured. When war started in September 1939 it was laid down that one month's notice was necessary for withdrawals in excess of £25. Several borrowers asked if they could pay interest only and this was agreed for those on military service. After Dunkirk in 1940, when Bexhill became a ghost town where only civilians with essential occupations were allowed to remain, the directors agreed in many cases to payment by borrowers being suspended altogether. Serious restrictions were placed on withdrawals. £5 could be taken out at once, but one month's notice had to be given for sums not exceeding £50 and for withdrawals in excess of £100 six months' notice was necessary.

Duplicate records were deposited with the Frome Building Society and photographs were taken of the conveyance to each borrower and every mortgage deed. For a short while the office was transferred to the Haywards Heath Building Society. Local enquiries were referred to the Solicitor and Barclays Bank undertook to pay withdrawals of £5 on

production of the passbook. The Devonshire Square office was not fully re-opened until February 1941.

Gradually things improved and Bexhill started getting back to normal. In May 1942 the Society started lending again and in January 1945 they adopted the advertising slogan "You find the house, we find the money".

The years following the end of the second war saw the introduction to the board of the stalwarts who were to conduct the affairs of the Society for the next twenty years. In 1948 Ben Godwin, a partner with his brother in the well respected firm of builders known as E. Godwin & Sons was co-opted to the board. At the Annual General Meeting Gordon L. Davis, son of Tom and owner of The Beehive next door to the Society's office in Devonshire Square, defeated R. C. Hampton on a ballot for election to the board. This caused something of a stir but Hampton behaved with dignity and said "For 34 years I have served the Society, but my non-election is one of the fortunes of war". The system of proxy voting was criticised and Hampton had another go the following year but was again defeated. All rather sad.

In the following year Ralph Burstow died and A. H. Davis replaced him as chairman. A. H. Davis, no relation of Tom and Gordon, was the one director who most certainly was not a local businessman. For over forty years Davis served on the railway and finished his career as chief linesman of the Bexhill signals and telegraph department. His interest in the National Union of Railwaymen led him to wider spheres, including local government. In July 1939 he was invited to accept nomination as Mayor the following November but when war intervened he stood down in order to allow W. N. Cuthbert to continue in office. For fifteen years he was chairman of the local bench of magistrates.

In 1950 H. W. "Jerry" Elsworth and John Baker were both co-opted to the board. In December 1953, A. H. Davis died. Gordon Davis was elected the new chairman and Cyril Emary, the town's leading jeweller, was elected to fill the vacancy. Percy Webber was now the only stalwart remaining on the board from the 1920s. So the new board was constituted.

1953 was the year of the great flood. The deeds of houses mortgaged to the Society were stored in boxes and kept at Barclays Bank in Devonshire Road. Early one Monday morning, Mr Russell the Bank Manager came into the Society's office and asked Wally Ledger and Douglas Carey to step over to the bank "as there has been a slight accident".

The Society's officials were horrified to find the vault containing the Society's deeds under three inches of water; over the weekend a cistern upstairs had overflowed. Many of the Society's deeds were affected to a greater or lesser degree and some very old parchment deeds resembled chamois leather. Douglas Carey recalls spending the next fortnight drying out the deeds as best he could. Seldom can a bank's strong room

have been used for such a purpose. Mr Russell prepared a declaration of "plight" to put with each set of deeds and no irreparable harm was done.

The next twenty five years were a period of remarkable calm. Changes in interest rates were few and far between. In common with most small Societies the directors invariably fixed rates for both investors and borrowers just above the figures recommended by the Building Societies Association. Having established this principle there was really precious little decision making to be done. This is in complete contrast with the very different financial climate prevailing today, when interest rates go up and down like a yo-yo and the cartel is no more. It was towards the end of this period that a number of provincial Building Societies – larger than the Bexhill certainly but still with distinct local geographical connections – first saw the scope for expansion nationwide. Thoughts of such grandeur never crossed the minds of this Society's directors who were content to see the accounts improve little by little from year to year.

In 1959 the Bexhill was included in the very first list of Societies given Trustee status under the House Purchase and Housing Act 1959. This gave the Society an extra aura of solidity. In 1960 the assets reached £1,000,000 and the amount advanced, £174,000, was also a record.

In 1962 Ben Godwin died and Wally Ledger was elected a director. 1965 was a year of change. Jerry Elsworth resigned as a director, having first had a considerable say in his successor. One can have nothing but admiration for his judgement as the new director, Peter Evenden, is now the Society's chairman. Indeed in his determination to ensure that the vacancy was filled by the right man, Jerry offered, presumably with tact and delicacy, to lend Peter the money necessary to acquire the director's share qualification. Following Allen Hardwicke's death in 1965 the writer became the Society's legal adviser and continued in that role until handing over to Malcolm Walker in 1987.

Reference has already been made to the fact that the directors themselves carried out valuations of properties offered to the Society as security. Sadly in 1970 a change in the law brought to an end a practice much enjoyed by the directors and greatly appreciated by local estate agents and solicitors. William Gordon Harris, for many years the principal of Riches & Gray Estate Agents and son of the director of the same name, writes:

"In the old days valuers were not employed but inspections were made by the directors. They all set off in the afternoon as if on a Sunday School treat and personally inspected all applications and the security of the properties involved. On their return to the Society's office decisions were made on the spot and mortgage offers were posted off that night. What an excellent service!

If I were selling a property where a mortgage was required in the morning I would 'phone dear old Ledger who would invariably discuss

the project and if sound he would say get the application in by 2 p.m. and I will give you the answer by 5 p.m. No inspection fee charged. I would often complete the application form myself on behalf of the proposed borrower.

As it was a local Society they were keen to assist local people who, after all, were the people who supported the investment funds. I have often heard it said that 'young so-and-so is the son of Mr so-and-so who I know well. Yes they are a very honest and upright family and I think we must try and help him'."

Subsequently George Coombs carried out most valuations of Bexhill properties until 1986 when Stephen Cawthorne took over.

In 1970 machine accounting was introduced and for the first time the Society's assets exceeded £2,000,000. In the following year the first "term shares" were issued.

Wally Ledger retired as secretary in 1972 and Raymond E. Tutton who

The board in 1974. From left to right – Cyril Emary, Walter Ledger, Raymond Tutton (Secretary), Gordon Davis, John Baker and Peter Evenden.

had been with the Society since 1947 was appointed to succeed him. Right up until his retirement Wally Ledger insisted on writing up the minutes of the board meetings in his own fair hand.

The grave financial crisis in 1973 brought with it a substantial increase in interest rates. The rate paid to investors in ordinary shares was increased to 7 1/2% tax paid and that paid by borrowers to 11% (the corresponding figures in 1947 were 2 1/4% and 4%). Despite the general gloom and doom the Society advanced that year a record £487,035.

In 1975 the chairman Gordon Davis died. John Baker was appointed chairman in his place and the writer joined the board. Since the second world war there can be scarcely anyone who has had a more profound influence on the affairs of Bexhill than John Baker. He was twice Mayor of the Borough and the acknowledged leader for a number of years of the party which controlled the Council.

His greatest scheme remains a dream. At the end of the 1960s John Baker was the prime mover in preparing "The Town Centre Development Plan" which would have involved substantial demolition in the middle of the town and the erection of a modern shopping centre. The plan failed to obtain the Council's support probably because too many Councillors had to declare an interest. Baker himself could not vote because he was a director of the Building Society which owned freehold premises in Devonshire Square. Twenty years on few would doubt that his plan should have been adopted. An amusing companion and one who performed many quiet acts of kindness, John Baker's abilities were almost certainly underrated by his contemporaries.

The offices in Devonshire Square had been modernised in 1974. In 1979 the board in venturesome mood and conscious of the rapid development at the west end of the town opened up their only branch office at Little Common. This was in Collier Court, newly erected by Skinner & Reeves. A jolly party was held to mark the official opening by Mrs Eileen Baker on 8th June 1979.

This expansion may seem odd in the light of what came next – the tangled affair of the abortive merger with the Cheltenham & Gloucester Building Society. Throughout its history the Bexhill has been tentatively wooed by other larger Societies, to whom a polite but firm refusal was always given.

The world for small Building Societies changed on 17th March 1978 when Harold Percy Jaggard, chairman and secretary of the Grays Building Society, died by his own hand. An avid gambler, Jaggard stole from the Grays two million pounds in cash over a period of forty years. The reverberations resulting from the discovery of this truly astonishing swindle were enormous.

The Registrar of Friendly Societies (responsible at that time for supervising Building Societies) promptly decided to investigate smaller Societies and Bexhill was early on the list. Two accountants from the Registry spent a week examining the Society's books and systems before the chairman and a colleague were summoned to the Registry in London.

Concern was expressed at the Society's lack of growth in real terms (eight other Societies had opened branches in Bexhill since 1970), the age of the directors and the whole question of the Society's internal organisation and management. The clear implication was that the

Opening of the Little Common branch, June 1979

Society should consider seriously a Transfer of Engagements before it was too late.

The directors took stock of the position. New systems of control would have to require two members of the staff to be involved in the simplest cash transaction and the collection of title deeds. Labour was becoming more expensive, costly equipment would have to be installed and competition would continue to become more and more intense.

The pressure was on and it was in these circumstances that the Cheltenham and Gloucester's proposals were considered to be the right solution.

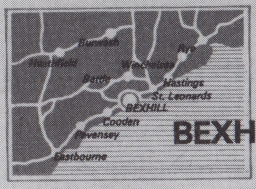
The detailed negotiations centred round the need to maintain a good local service and to ensure that the Bexhill's staff were properly looked after. The Instrument of Transfer of Engagements was sealed on the 24th October 1979 but required ratification by a three-fourths majority of the members. A special general meeting was called for the 3rd December 1979 for the purpose of passing the necessary resolution. It was only when the news broke that those associated with the Bexhill realised what a very special place it had in the affections of the townsfolk.

The month of November 1979 was the most fraught in the Society's history. The Bexhill Observer's understandably emotional leader set off a flurry of letters opposing the merger. The Society replied with a press advertisement and a letter from Ralph Stow of the Cheltenham & Gloucester was published, but it became increasingly obvious that the necessary majority for the merger would not be obtained. The voting was running at about 60/40 in favour of the merger. Quick and important decisions had to be taken. The two Societies sensibly decided to cancel the special general meeting, at which undoubtedly feelings would have run high. The letter on the following page was hurriedly composed and sent out only five days before the date fixed for the meeting.

Although in no way the original object of the exercise the interest aroused by the abortive merger gave the Society just the publicity and boost it needed for survival. In the words of the Bexhill Observer "a substantial number of townsfolk evidently have greater faith in the institution than the directors dared believe".

The directors were as good as their word (not that they had much choice). Within a fortnight Anthony H. Bough, a partner in Hamilton & Wilton, Chartered Accountants and Ronald H. W. Storkey, the extremely active President of the Chamber of Commerce, were invited to join the board. Shortly afterwards Cyril Emary, who had completed 25 years service with the Society, retired and Maureen Shuttleworth became a director. Maureen's experience in London banking circles has been of great value.

There was much to be done. Ron Storkey and Maureen Shuttleworth were put in charge of advertising. The Society which had already started



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R. E. TUTTON, Secretary
— BANKERS
BARCLAYS BANK LTD., BEXHILL
— SOLICITORS
GABY, HARDWICKE & CO.,
2 EVERSLEY ROAD, BEXHILL-ON-SEA

BEXHILL-ON-SEA BUILDING SOCIETY

BUILDING SOCIETY CHAMBERS, DEVONSHIRE SQUARE, BEXHILL-ON-SEA TN40 1AE

also at: 26 COODEN SEA ROAD, LITTLE COMMON Tel. Cooden 5688

November 1979

Dear Member,

The number of Proxies already lodged show that the Special Resolution authorising the Transfer of Engagements to the Cheltenham & Gloucester Building Society will not obtain the statutory three-fourths majority.

The Cheltenham & Gloucester Building Society have been informed and it has been mutually agreed by the Boards of both Societies that the proposed Transfer be rescinded.

Accordingly the Meeting called for the 3rd December, having been convened for a purpose which no longer subsists, has been cancelled.

Members will realise that the reasons which prompted the Directors to recommend the merger indicate that in their opinion changes in the present organisation of the Society are necessary and inevitable. New blood will be brought on to the Board and the Directors will forthwith review in detail all aspects of the Society's operations.

The Directors are greatly heartened by the enthusiasm shown for our local Society. Whether you voted for or against the merger we rely on your continued support.

Yours sincerely,

John Baker
Chairman.

MEMBER OF THE BUILDING SOCIETIES ASSOCIATION

to sponsor local organisations now made known its willingness to help local charities, sports clubs and the like by providing them with posters and tickets.

Pillory Barn were called in and produced a fresh logo to help on the Society's new image. A new computer was ordered. New forms were devised for the monthly financial statement and the valuer's report. Richard H. Mead was appointed the Society's first internal auditor and the Society even found a new strong room.

At the end of 1980 Michael A. Varney was appointed to succeed Raymond Tutton. Michael Varney was given the title "General Manager and Secretary" and set about the absolutely vital task of overhauling all office procedures necessary for proper "control, inspection and supervision". This was a mammoth task ably undertaken and resulted in detailed manuals of procedure and board standing orders so essential to satisfy the Registrar and the Society's external auditors.

John Baker died suddenly in February 1981 and Peter Evenden was elected the new chairman. Although the Society's radical reorganisation was by no means completed when John Baker died he must have known that the Society had emerged successfully from the Cheltenham and Gloucester affair and that the required reforms were proceeding apace.

Throughout the 1980s competition has become increasingly fierce both to attract investors and to find borrowers. In October 1983 the Building Societies Association announced that "recommended" rates of interest would be replaced by "advised" rates, and in early 1986 "advised" rates were abandoned altogether so leaving each Building Society to fight for itself.

The Accounting Regulations made under the Building Societies Act 1986 prescribed that the word "profit" shall be substituted for "surplus" and this change symbolises how different modern aggressive marketing attitudes are from the old concept of "mutuality" on which Building Societies were founded.

In 1987 Rodney Gadsden, principal of Abbott & Abbott, Estate Agents joined the board and it was in this year that the assets first exceeded ten million pounds. 1988 was even more successful. The assets increased to £12,330,265. £2,836,298 was advanced on mortgage during the year and the profit after tax was £106,937.

As we come to the end of the story it is pleasant to record the Society's gratitude to what may be called its "auxiliaries". Right from the very beginning the Society has been faithful to its auditors, bankers and insurers and this loyalty has been amply repaid. Mannington & Hubbard were the Society's first auditors and Gibbons & Mannington continue in that office today. Colin Smith has now been watching over the Society for 23 years. As was to be expected he has performed his duties meticulously and also with considerable understanding.

The Society has banked at the same premises in Devonshire Road since 1914. These were occupied at that time by the London & Provincial Bank and became a branch of Barclays in 1921.

At the first directors' meeting in 1914 it was resolved that "Mr Gaby be instructed to obtain the £200 offered by the British Law Insurance Co". The Society has always had the happiest association with the old British Law, and its successors the Sun Alliance Insurance Group continue to insure the vast majority of the homes in mortgage to the Society.

The Society has long had close links with the Legal and General Assurance Society which has issued many policies for the Society's endowment mortgages. In 1988 the Society assumed power to arrange all types of insurance. In order to widen the services available to members, the Society has recently become an appointed agent of the Scottish Life Assurance Company.

Throughout its history the Society has been blessed with a loyal staff. In addition to those already mentioned, names from the old days which spring to mind are W. J. Clifton, who served just before and after the second world war, Miss Waite, who went to Canada and Cyril Harlow, who for many years following the second war kept the books in a totally reliable and unfussy manner – in such contrast to his successor the volatile computer. Ron Storkey was put in charge of this inhuman monster. His patience and perseverance in coping with its vagaries must surely qualify him for canonisation.

Of the present staff mention has already been made of Michael Varney, whose efficiency ensures that the Society complies with all the manifold requirements of the 1986 Act and the new Building Societies Commission. Janet Cole has been with the Society since 1957 and looks after the Little Common office. Peter Mitchell-Davis joined the Society in 1967 and is now the office manager. His enthusiasm and cheerful winning ways are of enormous benefit to the Society.

The spring of 1989 sees the Bexhill Society in good heart. Nevertheless the harsh facts of life remain. Each year the number of Building Societies declines. At the end of 1978 there were 316 Building Societies and 134 were smaller than Bexhill. At the end of 1988 there were 131 altogether but only 19 were smaller. In 1978 Keith Brading the Registrar of Friendly Societies prophesied that eventually the number of Societies would be reduced to forty. In seeking to continue, is the Bexhill Society attempting to be a village Hampden or should it be likened to King Canute? Time will show, but meanwhile so long as local support and enthusiasm persist the Society aims to carry on what it set out to do seventy five years ago – provide a safe home for savings and help the good folk of Bexhill with their house purchases.

1989.117